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AUTHOR Rivera, William M.
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ABSTRACT

Professional life planning means taking a self-directed, systematic approach to professional renewal. To engage in professional life planning (or self-directed professional development) is to take greater control of one's life. Four major actions comprise the essence of professional life planning; they are self-assessment of professional strengths and weaknesses, planning professional growth through goal setting, organizing activities and records in line with goals, and evaluating periodically one's professional situation and goals. Aside from continuing professional education, a number of professional development opportunities are open to the self-directed planner. They involve (1) joining professional associations; (2) attending professional conferences; (3) participating in relevant seminars and meetings; (4) attending workshops to enhance strengths or overcome a weakness; and (5) integrating professional information into one's life. A systematic approach to one's professional growth requires a willingness to grow and readiness to become involved. With systematic effort, growth and change become natural aspects of one's life and professional stance. (KC)

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# PROFESSIONAL LIFE PLANNING:
# A SELF-DIRECTED, SYSTEMATIC APPROACH

BY

WILLIAM M. RIVERA*
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
COLLEGE PARK

*Dr. Rivera is Chairman of the AEA/USA Committee on professional Development. He has assisted various universities with faculty and staff development.

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PROFESSIONAL LIFE PLANNING: A SELF-DIRECTED, SYSTEMATIC APPROACH

I read a story recently about a villager who was picked up by a driver and given a lift. When asked if he could read the highway sign, he replied, "Yep, I can read some of it. I can read how fur, but I can't read where to." (1)

Professional life often enough resembles the literacy capacity of the villager just quoted. We know "how fur" we've come because we can read that part of our career sign, but we don't really know "where to" we're going. Often enough, we become complacent or so pressured by the "workload" that we get stuck in routine and seldom look to see the direction in which we're headed. We don't even know if the direction in which we're headed is the one we want or would choose if we stopped to read the sign "where to" more carefully.

Professional life planning as defined in this paper refers to taking a self-directed, systematic approach to professional renewal. Professional renewal is not something that happens automatically; it must be made to happen. Indeed, the tendency among many professionals is to become satisfied with the status quo, to arrive at a kind of self-esteem without further self-actualization. To engage in professional life planning is to take greater control of one's life. Indeed, such engagement means planning one's life so that professional development and direction become more focussed, like sharpening poor vision by means of glasses or a new prescription.

## 1. Making Distinctions

Before going farther it will perhaps be useful to make some distinctions with respect to professional development.

Various terms are used. Among the most popular are career development, staff development, preservice and inservice education, faculty development, human resource development. The latter terms speak to university faculty and business personnel respectively. Preservice education precedes professional activity. Staff development and inservice training are generally used interchangeably. Career development comes closest to the meaning of "professional life planning" although the former usually suggests development through counselling or assistance. The term professional life planning is meant to connote self-directed professional development.

As several of the above-mentioned terms imply, professional development is often an administrative strategy on the part of employers, educational institutions or professional organizations to improve their workers, faculty or members. While such bodies provide a pressure or encouragement, professional development is also a personal matter and requires practical self-direction.

## 2. Practical Self-Direction

Practical self-direction appears to be limited, almost by definition, to personal action, and yet it has value for staff development purposes as well. While professional life planning is a personal matter, it is also a means for staff-development personnel to stimulate greater interest in education and training choices. In other

words, while aimed at the individual the exercise may lead to clarity as to what faculty or staff may desire, or need, in the way of professional development. Thus, it serves the individual and at the same time may foster staff-development efforts.

But what does professional life planning involve? What are the guidelines toward successful professional life planning? Does it differ among professionals, for instance: faculty, administrators, teachers, auxiliary staff?

Four major actions comprise the essence of professional life planning; they are: self assessment of professional strengths and weaknesses, planning professional growth through goal setting, organizing activities and records in line with goals, and evaluating periodically one's professional situation and goals. On the basis of evaluations, then, new assessments and new plans are made.

The self assessment process is a tricky one. For what do we mean by strengths and weaknesses. ASTD President Leo Hauser in his "Five Steps to Success" (2) argues that the real question is not what one wants (or needs) to do better but rather, what does one do well and how can that be improved. If you have a "fast ball," he argues, then stick with it until you have it down perfect. Stick with the good you've got, in other words. Nevertheless, in many cases, a weakness can detract or mar what otherwise would be an unbeatable strength. Learning something about computers, for example, may save a professional time as well as give a sense of being "in the swim" of contemporary developments. It may help in particular to widen the range of people with whom one can communicate and also, affect the way one may think about data.

The planning process is often frustrating, even difficult. It requires certain re-visioning of oneself and a shift in attitudes and behaviors--forcing one to confront one's self-understanding and assume aspirations. Defensive behavior patterns deter growth and change by bolstering mechanisms that distort reality. Professional goal setting, in contrast, is a process that encourages systematic thinking about one's future and the specific professional purposes.

The organizing process demands that one structure reality by developing records and projects, priorities and activities in such a way that they grown in meaning and assist in analysis of one's efforts thereby contributing to decisionmaking in one's professional life. It is a way of developing activities and records so that they reflect the dimensions of one's professional personality and goals. Sometimes such organization appears obvious, or is even imposed professionally, but a review of the structure is always useful.

Evaluation too is demanding. For one thing, it means stopping at some cut-off point in order to re-group ideas and analyse attainments. As with educational evaluation generally, a thorough analysis of goals attainment may only be part of the picture one wants to capture. Cost considerations may be a major influence, depending on one's aspirations, as are the rewards that come with the work. Evaluation calls on professionals to assess their performance over time as well as their learning, achievement and rewards.

3. Professional Development at Large

Aside from continuing professional education, a number of professional development opportunities are open to the self-directed planner. These opportunities are perhaps obvious, but merit repeating if only to indicate that they represent a part of any inclusive professional life plan. They involve:

a) joining professional associations
b) attending professional conferences
c) participating in relevant colloquia, seminars, meetings
d) attending quality workshops to enhance a professional strength or strengthen a weakness
e) integrating professional information into one's life--through reading professional journals and newsletters, listening to cassette tapes related to career interests, etc.

Part of taking advantage of continuing professional opportunities is knowing what resources and support services are available, such as statewide and national clearinghouses, educational libraries, referral information services, etc. Although, when faced with a lack of resources, one alternative is to create one's own network of professionals--through correspondence and by phone, drawing on professional associations or personal contact within the field.

Self-Appraisal

Self-appraisal and planning go hand in hand. What does one need as a developing professional, as a communicator, an educational counsellor, a consultant, instructor, program developer, administrator? What questions does one need to ask in any one of these domains and what

would be the required and present level of development? An excellent guide for professionals in the area of university extension has been written by Canadian colleague, Wayne Lamble (3). The issue of competencies needed by Adult Basic Education specialists has been treated by Donald W. Mocker at the University of Missouri (4). A number of general studies on the subject of adult education competencies appeared in the late 1970's (5,6,7).

In general, self-appraisal requires:

1) constructing a model of required or desired competencies
2) assessing one's present level of competence
3) identifying strengths and in performance and relating these to learning opportunities and work organization
4) consulting with trusted others about one's professional qualities and learning needs
5) prioritizing strengths and learning needs

5. Planning

Planning is a process and not a list of "to do's;" essentially it involves the following:

1) specifying one professional goals and objectives
2) identifying professional opportunities, resources and strategies (or creating them as need be)
3) setting target dates for accomplishment of objectives-- i.e. professional-involvement, continuing-professional-education, and structural-organization objectives
4) specify evidence of accomplishment in some record, file or notebook
5) specify how valid the evidence is i.e. how has it been validated, by whom
6) consult with others about your plan
7) in implementing the plan, keep track of the main goals
8) evaluate accomplishments periodically, at least every six months
9) review and set new goals following every evaluation and/or self-appraisal

While a written plan is not necessary to an organized

professional-development effort, it is always useful as a reference and guide. Especially when things aren't going well, it is a reminder of the big picture.

6. Organizing

At the core of a systematic approach to professional planning is personal organization. Organizing refers to at least three actions: planning, keeping records and net working. Organizing the plan into main avenues of action requires a system for directing action into those avenues. Organizing the process of record keeping requires setting up certain habitual procedures for eventual recall, analysis and evaluation.

Different strata of professionals will organize their purposes and plans in distinct fashion. In general, teachers will direct their professional development toward learning more about teaching (methods, techniques, materials), educational evaluative approaches to judging programs, new knowledge about adult learning and development. Administrators may want to organize themselves according to aspects of program development, administration, evaluation, and specific activities of staff. Faculty will want to keep separate portfolios, files or boxes on activities related to teaching, scholarship and professional services.

With respect to record keeping, everyone has some sort of system (or suffers from its lack). Almost everyone keeps a calendar or appointment book with notes on events, people to meet and things to do. Some keep notebooks of phone calls received and topics discussed for

purposes of future reference. Others keep diaries or notebooks (learning logs) of professional activities and results.

Organizing also involves developing networks of colleagues for regular consultation and exchange of ideas and information. Networking is a powerful means of keeping professionals alive to what's happening in their areas of interest and for mutual support. Organizing networks of professional friends with similar interests may include everything from:

1. scheduled meetings or phone calls to speak about particular concerns,
2. regular letters to a group of professionals to discuss specific issues, and,
3. engaging in Delphi sessions and other future-casting exercises to explore innovative ideas with colleagues.

Networking is crucial; for this author it includes exchanging draft articles with colleagues, contacts for critical comments on project development, and brainstorming about planning and program evaluation. Finally, a group of colleagues is the base for references when promotion time or job-change opportunities arise.

Another technique for organizing one's professional development is to formulate "applied learning project" (ALP) contracts from time to time with oneself, another person or group. On one-page, identify the learning project to be undertaken and the outcomes desired, specifying what is to be done and when, who is to be involved and how the ALP will be evaluated. Include starting and completion dates, and then, set up the project activity. For examples, the activity may involve

participation in certain professional seminars or meeting with colleagues on a regular basis to discuss specific topics with a specific objective in mind.

## 7. Evaluating for Renewal or New Directions

It is most important for self-directed professionals to review their accomplishments from time to time, to ask such questions as: "Where am I now professionally?", "Where do I want to go professionally?" and "How can I get there?"

Evaluating a professional life plan should include a review of one's self (strengths and weaknesses again), the plan and goals attained or unattained, the organization of one's professional life and what it indicates, and the focus of one's evaluation, i.e. and what one thinks of value (personal achievement, rank, salary, social impact, or whatever). Evaluating oneself and one's goals is more than a useful exercise. It is imperative for renewal of spirit within one's profession, for clarity of purpose, and for setting new directions, new goals that complement or alter one's previous orientation.

## 8. Summary

The present paper briefly summarizes the meaning, general parameters, and major guidelines for developing a personal program of self-directed professional advancement. While limiting itself to the professional aspects on one's life, it does not mean to suggest that other, personal goals need not be considered or that they they won't

affect one's professional life. On the contrary, a full-fledged plan will foresee the needs one has in other aspects of living and appreciate, indeed, how these contribute to successful professional life plannning.

A systematic approach to one's professional growth is first and foremost a question of willingness to grow and readiness to become involved. It requires the effort to assess oneself, to plan, to organize and to evaluate one's professional life in such a way that continual renewal, growth and change become natural aspects of one's life in general and one's professional stance.

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